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ABSTRACT

In an effort to identify the obstacles to the associate degree's universal acceptance as the equivalent of the first 2 years of senior college/university study and to suggest specific steps at the state, system, and institutional levels that might address these obstacles, the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) and the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) collaborated on a survey of all members (comprised of presidents and other administrators, faculty, and others at both two- and four-year colleges). Survey findings include: (1) administrators at two-year institutions believed the obstacles to baccalaureate access were greater than administrators at four-year institutions; (2) a major obstacle identified was the reluctance of four-year institutions to accept coursework taken at two-year schools for the A.A.S. degree; (3) key obstacles identified for baccalaureate degree access involved lack of daycare, inconvenient course times, shortage of financial aid, poor advisement services, and lack of distance education courses; (4) articulation agreements were cited as the area where the most substantial progress has been made; and (5) a common course numbering system between two- and four-year institutions was identified as the area needing the most attention. Document includes comments from survey respondents. (Author/EMH)

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Access to the Baccalaureate
Research Synopsis

American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU)

American Association of Community Colleges (AACC)

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
Access to the Baccalaureate Project Survey
May 9, 2003

Overview of the Transfer Role

From the 1901 founding of Joliet Junior College, considered the first "community college," a core function of the American two-year college has been transfer. As initially conceived, a well-equipped two-year college, with appropriately credentialed faculty, was assumed to be capable of offering instruction at the freshman and sophomore levels equal in rigor and breadth to a university and could do so in a setting of small classes with close faculty-student interaction. Those students who completed a prescribed sequence of general education and specialized courses over their two years at community college would then be able to transfer earned credits to a senior college and begin their studies at the senior college with full junior standing.

The capstone of a student's two years of study at a community college was to be the Associate Degree, as introduced by William Rainey Harper at the University of Chicago late in the 19th century. This degree consisted of 60 semester hours, comprising general education courses designed to provide the student with mastery of basic college-level skills and an introduction to the major disciplinary fields. Very quickly, this single degree evolved into the Associate in Arts, with an emphasis upon general education courses in the liberal arts, and the Associate in Science, with an emphasis upon courses in the natural and physical sciences. Toward the end of the 20th century, the Associate in Applied Science (AAS) degree has gained in popularity. This degree offers the student relatively limited exposure to general education courses, emphasizing instead discipline-specific vocational courses.

As the community college grew in number and enrollments over the course of the 20th century, many in the higher education community grew concerned that the Associate Degree, in whatever form, was failing to realize its full potential as a vehicle to facilitate transfer. Despite various initiatives, the number of Associate degrees awarded has not kept pace with growth in community college total enrollment, and, of even greater concern, a growing percentage of community college students were transferring to senior colleges and universities without first earning the degree or, had they earned the degree, were being admitted with less than junior standing.

Purpose of the Access to the Baccalaureate Survey

In an effort to identify both the obstacles to the Associate degree's universal acceptance as the equivalent of the first two years of senior college/university study and to suggest specific steps at the state, system, and institutional levels that might address these barriers, the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) and the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) collaborated on a survey of their respective memberships, comprising presidents and other administrators, faculty, and others at both two- and four-year colleges. The survey demonstrated a

high degree of consensus among those surveyed with respect to both the barriers standing in the way of a revitalized Associate degree and strategies capable of removing existing barriers. Following is a summary of the survey's findings.

Perceived Disparity of Standards

Despite a substantial body of research documenting the comparability in basic college skills and breadth of knowledge of Associate degree holders and native students, the barrier most frequently noted by survey participants is the perception that community college graduates are simply less well-prepared academically than students who began their studies at a four-year institution. This perception cut across institutional boundaries, emerging as the dominant undercurrent of all responses. Where four-year college and university faculty attributed this obstacle to a lack of intellectual challenge at two-year colleges (as one senior-college faculty member summarized the view of colleagues, "There is a belief among faculty that some two-year campuses lack academic standards with respect to course expectations in comparison with four-year-institutions"), two-year college faculty attributed the problem to a dismissive and unfounded attitude on the part of four-year faculty that community college courses simply lack the rigor and breadth of content of "equivalent" senior college courses.

In addition to this questioning of the comparative rigor of two-year college courses, the open-ended responses of survey participants, when clustered and compiled, revealed a high degree of consensus on a number of other, more specific barriers to baccalaureate transfer. These obstacles ranged from the process of transfer to such student-related factors as access and cost.

Articulation Issues

Beyond the issue of perceived comparability, the principal obstacle to successful transfer identified by survey participants was the complex set of inter-institutional arrangements collectively known as *articulation*. Essentially, articulation is the process by which two- and four-year colleges formally agree on the equivalency of courses, thereby permitting credits earned at the two-year college to be counted toward the baccalaureate at the four-year institution. Unfortunately, numerous obstacles frequently confront students who seek to transfer two-year college courses, even where there is a formal articulation agreement between the two institutions.

Among the many articulation barriers noted by two- and four-year faculty are the lack of any formal, inter-institutional agreement, the failure of senior-college officials to enforce existing agreements at the departmental level, the imposition by four-year colleges of additional general education requirements beyond those listed in the formal transfer agreement, and a more general failure to regularly review and publicize up-dated agreements.

Content and Comparability of Core Course work

According to survey participants, another major hindrance to transfer revolves around fundamental disagreement over the composition of the basic general education core expected of baccalaureate

candidates. While in recent years a number of state legislatures have mandated a common general education core for all state two- and four-year institutions, the survey revealed that institutional adoption of this core has been inconsistent. Even faculty from four-year institutions acknowledged that, despite such mandates, "not all four-year institutions have adopted [the general education core.]" In the same vein, two-year college faculty reported that "Theory and practice for the [general education] model are often incongruent."

A long-standing concern of two-year colleges seeking to promote transfer is the practice of some programs within four-year institutions to impose course requirements above and beyond institutional general education requirements. Some four-year programs argue that these requirements are mandated by program-specific accreditation standards (as in the case of NCATE), or the need for course prerequisites to upper-division courses which have no place as part of the institution's general education core. Two-year college faculty, however, view the "inflexible" imposition of additional course requirements at the program level of four-year institutions not simply as obstacles to "seamless" transfer, but also as a means to indirectly limit the number of potential transfer students absent program-to-program transfer agreements.

Impact of the Associate of Applied Science Degree

The increasing popularity of the Associate in Applied Science (AA/AS) Degree has created a new, and largely unanticipated range of obstacles to seamless transfer. Among these obstacles, noted by four-year faculty, is that many institutions granting the AA/AS degree have yet to secure regional accreditation, and that the preponderance of courses included in these programs, because of their explicitly vocational orientation, have no general education equivalent at most four-year institutions. Two-year faculty note, however, that AA/AS degree holders are under increasing pressure from their employers to acquire the baccalaureate, because of the rapidly developing cognate base of these fields, and that this need could be readily met if more four-year colleges were to put aside their long-standing unwillingness to accept the academic legitimacy of vocational courses and programs.

Process and Information Flow

Not all obstacles to transfer, according to survey participants, are structural. Many originate in inadequate or flawed processes, especially with respect to the flow of accurate and timely transfer information among institutions, and between institutions and students. Two- and four-year faculty agreed that there is a pressing need to strengthen the knowledge base of faculty and staff at both institutions with respect to frequently changing transfer requirements. Two-year faculty reflected a particular concern that four-year institutions provide incomplete information on their current transfer requirements, or fail to routinely up-date transfer information. As one two-year faculty member observed, "The printed and Web-based materials reflecting articulation agreements are woefully lacking and out-of-date."

Cost and Distance

Beyond institutional and process obstacles, two-year college faculty, in particular, noted a range of

student-specific obstacles whose resolution will require innovative solutions. One such obstacle is distance – the fact that many graduates of geographically isolated two-year colleges are simply unable to relocate to a four-year institution often several hundred miles distant. A second obstacle within this cluster is the issue of cost. Not only do both two and four-year faculty agree that states have failed to provide the basic funding necessary to support the staff and processes essential to effective transfer, but that a general reduction in state support continues to raise the cost beyond the reach of many able students.

Solutions and Best Practices

Both two and four-year faculty reflected a high degree of agreement that any effort to reduce existing barriers to student transfer must begin with the development and implementation of effective articulation agreements. Ideally, such agreements would follow the 2+2 model, with the AAS Degree providing the student with all required general education courses as well as a limited number of introductory courses in the student's desired field of study. Recalling the model initially proposed by William Rainey Harper, upper division courses would serve as a capstone to this program of study, leading to a field-specific baccalaureate degree. Certain states, notably Illinois and North Carolina, were frequently mentioned for having made progress in this direction, and providing possible models for other state systems.

Along with the introduction of 2+2 programs, many survey participants indicated the importance of combining such initiatives with program-to-program agreements, thereby ensuring transfer students a seamless transition into their desired cognate field. One model, Maryland's recently adopted Associate of Arts in Teaching (AAT) degree, was cited as a potential model. At the same time, the widespread popularity of the AAS degree presents obstacles that even program-to-program initiatives may not easily resolve. Initiatives which either use upper division courses to provide AAS students with the general education courses they did not take at the community college, or the introduction of the BAAS degree reflect efforts on the part of both two- and four-year colleges to respond to growing employer demands for formal education that builds on the AAS degree. Another cluster of initiatives designed to facilitate transfer includes the introduction of a dual-credit/dual-enrollment option for community college students intent on the baccalaureate. Such programs guarantee admission to specific programs at four-year colleges, notably nursing and education, for those students who complete a prescribed program of study at the community college with a minimum grade point average.

Technology as the Key

In the view of survey participants, the resolution of information obstacles to transfer will come through an expanded and enhanced use of technology, particularly Web-based technology. Among the more established, Web-based systems maintained to facilitate transfer are Minnesota's multi-system Web-site, Utah's online academic advising system and ARTSYS, the articulation System for Maryland colleges and universities. Importantly, these Web-based systems are not only accessible to college personnel and students, but also to the general public, so that individuals can weigh their transfer options even before enrollment. No less importantly, these systems are well maintained to

ensure accuracy and encourage states to explore other initiatives supportive of transfer, including common course numbering systems.

As with improving transfer information, a variety of technology-based initiatives are moving forward to eliminate the barriers of distance and access for place-bound AA/AS degree holders. One initiative, found in New Mexico, Texas and Kentucky, is the "virtual university." The virtual university uses various technologies to bring upper division courses to isolated and place bound students in sparsely populated areas of these states. In other states, such as Florida, community colleges are being given specific legislative authority to offer baccalaureate degrees when senior institutions simply cannot meet the demand, while other states are exploring the joint use of facilities, so that a student can complete a baccalaureate degree on the same campus, even though lower and upper division courses are offered by two separate institutions.

Steps to Eliminate Cost as a Barrier

While apparently less widespread, some survey participants indicated that their institutions are taking significant steps to eliminate financial barriers to student transfer. Even during a period of limited new funding, some two and four-year colleges are purposefully reallocating aid or reducing tuition to support the transfer of both high-need and academically gifted students. Such initiatives include the creation of targeted financial aid programs, the award of earmarked financial aid to students who achieve high GPA's prior to transfer, and a one-third reduction in tuition at state senior colleges for transfer students enrolled in a joint program and who have maintained a minimum 3.0 GPA.

Access to the Baccalaureate

Research Synopsis

Survey funded by the Lumina Foundation for Education

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Survey research was conducted in preparation for this invitational conference. It focused on systematically identifying barriers to baccalaureate level education, practices that help overcome those barriers and initiatives that seem promising in the way of overcoming barriers. All members of AASCU and AACC were surveyed. What follows is a synopsis of the survey results.

Summary of Quantitative Analysis

- On almost every item dealing with obstacles to access to baccalaureate education, 2-year institutions perceive the obstacles to be greater than do 4-year institutions.
- The expressed differences reported between 2-year and 4-year institutions do not seem to be greatly affected by institutional characteristics such as geographic region, degree of urbanization, enrollment size, or expenditures. The key variable appears to be whether the respondent is from a 2-year or 4-year institution.
- The major obstacle identified by survey respondents is the reluctance of baccalaureate institutions to accept coursework taken at 2-year schools on programs leading to the AAS degree.
- Other key obstacles identified by survey respondents deal more with particular needs of community college transfer students and adult returning students – daycare, course offerings at appropriate times, financial aid for targeted populations, and advising personnel specifically trained to work with transfer and non-traditional students.
- The major higher education system issue identified as a barrier by survey respondents is the need for adequate distance education programs.
- In terms of successful initiatives to address barriers to access to baccalaureate education, articulation agreements were cited as the area where the most substantial progress has been made.
- In terms of the least progress, a common course numbering system between 2-year and 4-year institutions was identified as the area needing the most attention.

Summary of Qualitative Analysis

Survey participants were invited to provide open-ended responses to three questions related to student access and transfer in higher education. The questions related to identification of specific obstacles to student access and transfer; to identification of proven initiatives for addressing those obstacles and to identification of promising new initiatives for reducing or eliminating obstacles to access and transfer. Representative responses have been extracted and are presented below.

Based on comments received from responding administrators about obstacles faced by students trying to access baccalaureate level education, the categorical results are strikingly similar across the sectors. Ranks resulted from a count of the number of comments.

Four-year institutions		**Two-year institutions**	
Sector Rank	Obstacle	Obstacle	Sector Rank
1	Issues related to articulation	Issues related to reliable information/advising	1
2	Issues related to reliable information/advising	Issues related to articulation	2
3	Issues related to program-specific transfer	Issues related to program-specific transfer	3
4	Issues related to general education	Issues related to general education	4
5	Issues related to AAS/Technical Education transfer	Issues related to AAS/Technical Education transfer	5
6	Issues related to access/distance education	Issues related to cost/financial aid	6
7	Issues related to cost/financial aid	Issues related to access/distance education	7

We have selected representative comments from the survey that address the above obstacles reported by the survey respondents. Each set of comments has been placed on a separate page for ease of comparison.

Comments about Articulation Obstacles

Four-year institutions	Two-year institutions
• Courses from community colleges do not match courses at baccalaureate institutions, and thus do not meet transfer requirements.	• Expectation by some 4-year institutions that community college programs of study will virtually mirror their own before the senior institution will consider a 2+2 agreement.
• Disagreement between 2-year and 4-year institutions as to whether specific courses offered by both institutions are appropriately offered at the lower division or upper division level.	• Lack of true, systematic, core-to-core and dual admission articulation agreements with state-owned and state-related institutions.
• Students who wish to transfer credits or associate degrees from institutions without regional accreditation.	• Our state has in place a 2+2 articulation agreement, including common prerequisites. Unfortunately, some universities impose additional requirements that conflict with or negate the common prerequisites.
• Conflicting start and stop dates in academic calendars.	
• All coursework taken at community college does not count toward degree lengthening time to graduation.	• An articulation agreement is in place, but it is not adhered to by offices below the level of President and Provost.
• Academic departments at baccalaureate institutions have little or no incentive to be proactive in maintaining articulation agreements.	• Continued dominance of departmental admission requirements over institutional admission requirements at 4-year institutions.

Comments about General Education Obstacles

Four-year institutions	Two-year institutions
• Although our state has a statewide 42 hour competency-based program built around eight skill and knowledge areas, not all four-year institutions have adopted it. • A major obstacle in our state is the state university-mandated general education program, which is required of all public baccalaureate colleges, but not the community colleges. • Differences in campus general education requirements – incoming transfer courses almost always count, but may count only as electives. • Varied general education requirements at baccalaureate institutions to the point where it is impossible for students at the community college to take courses that meet the requirements of all public universities. Idiosyncratic general education requirements at 4-year institutions that do not match standard courses at community colleges.	• The general education curriculum at our institution is not consistent with that at state senior institutions in depth and breadth. • Baccalaureate institutions that make significant changes in their general education requirements, resulting in loss of equivalency with 2-year institutions. • University interpretation and acceptance of block general education agreements are limited in scope and do not always allow for seamless 2+2 transfer. Theory and practice for the model are often incongruent. • Students work on baccalaureate general education requirements at the community college only to find that different 4-year institutions have different interpretations as to what constitutes general education. • Within the same university, general education requirements vary widely, depending upon the major.

Comments about Program Requirements Obstacles

Four-year institutions	Two-year institutions
• Specialized accreditation requirements restrict acceptance of some community college coursework at senior institutions."	• Lack of uniformity between institutional requirements for admission and what individual colleges within the university will accept.
• Specific baccalaureate programs have cognate course requirements and hesitate to accept community college courses.	• Resistance by our state university system to abide by a statute creating an Associate of Arts in Teaching program.
• Individual departments adding prerequisites to an upper division course. This affects both native and transfer students and lengthens time to graduation.	• Our state's Associate of Arts degree is supposed to transfer easily to 4-year institutions. It does not, owing to stringent institution and department-specific requirements.
• Certain courses do not serve as equivalent courses for the major, but are acceptable as electives.	• In specialized degree areas, the assumption that only upper division institutions can provide core content, which is frequently redundant with coursework taken at the community college.
• Transferability of credit – depends more on program than institution.	• Requirements at senior institutions that are so program-specific that many students lose credits unless they select a major as a freshman and never change that major.
• Not all programs at the university are unlimited seat admission, so students may have to meet restrictions and additional program requirements once they are admitted to the University.	

Comments about AAS Transfer Issues

Four-year institutions	Two-year institutions
• Associate of Applied Science degree programs need to be more flexible to give students intending to transfer to 4-year institutions the opportunity to take more general education type courses. • Governing Board's refusal to accept technical institution credits, except for a very limited number of general education credits. • AAS degrees with very low numbers of general education hours necessitates completing additional hours of general education to obtain the four-year degree. • Community colleges fostering of AAS programs as other than terminal degree programs, with students expecting to transfer easily.	• Lack of acceptance of technically related coursework toward degree. • Student attempting to transfer to institutions where technical degrees, particularly the AAS, lack support at the 4-year institution for transfer purposes. • Lack of acceptance of AAS degree for junior status, even where appropriate general education requirements have been met. • The general attitude in our state regarding technical colleges. In general, technical college credit is not considered comparable to four-year credit. • Lack of alignment between community college vocational and technical courses, and credit awarded at senior institutions. • Unwillingness of universities to create Bachelor of Technology degree.

Comments about Communication Issues

Four-year institutions	Two-year institutions
• Lack of coordination in procedures that are specifically designed for transfer and non-traditional students. There needs to be more policy development and training. • Lack of coordination between advisors at community and tribal colleges and advisors at four-year institutions. • Lack of sufficient budget to support efforts to share data and develop common information. • Advising from community college to university needs strengthening, as well as training for professional advisors in all colleges at the university level. • Lack of information about the services, benefits, and outcomes of articulation. • Need for trained transfer student advisors.	• Community college students' lack of access to academic personnel at senior institutions who can answer transfer questions related to student's proposed major. • Lack of communication between 2-year and 4-year institutions in regard to agreements concerning transfer credit from vocational and technical programs. • Community colleges are not notified when requirements change at four year institutions. Often, community colleges find out about such changes from students, making advising difficult, particularly where students are trying to meet requirements of multiple institutions. • The printed and web-based material reflecting articulation agreements are woefully lacking and out-of-date.

Comments about Access and Delivery

Four-year institutions	Two-year institutions
• Community colleges offering upper division courses and expecting that those courses will transfer. • Lack of availability at distant sites, primarily due to absence of technological infrastructure. • Access – we are a remote, rural state. • Distance of campus from urban centers where largest number of non-traditional students reside. Relates to students' ability to commute or find work near campus. • We are geographically distant from all of the community colleges in the state. • Lack of availability of adequate communications infrastructure for distance education delivery in some parts of rural service area.	• Major-specific lower division courses offered only at senior institution and required as a prerequisite for major. • Absence of an adequate distance education baccalaureate program, offering a variety of degree completion options, at a senior institution in our state. Students have issues such as childcare, disability, rotating work shifts, etc. that make synchronous face-to-face learning almost impossible. • Lack of course offerings for working adults, especially evening students. • Reluctance of nearby baccalaureate institutions to offer courses at locations and times when non-traditional students can continue their educational pursuits. • Our students seek on-line educational opportunities. • Lack of baccalaureate options for students in areas where no senior institution is located.

The research also identified initiatives that are working to alleviate obstacles. The following list was culled from the responses.

Comments about Initiatives

A. Proliferation of successful, functional institutional and programmatic articulation agreements between 2-year and 4-year institutions.•Successful statewide 2+2 models:
   1. Illinois Articulation Initiative
   2. UNC System/North Carolina CC System
   3. Pennsylvania Academic Passport

B. Growth in number of program-to-program agreements between academic departments at 2-year and 4-year institutions. Example: State of Maryland authorized 2-year schools to create Associate of Arts in Teaching as lower division teacher education preparation to help alleviate teacher shortage. AA in Teaching is capped with BA in Teaching at senior institution.

C. A number of senior institutions have created bachelor's degree programs in Applied Sciences, specifically as a cap to the AAS degree. Other institutions have bachelor's degree programs in Engineering Technology as baccalaureate completion opportunities for AAS recipients.

D. Many four-year institutions have adopted "upside down" degree articulation agreements with 2-year colleges, wherein the general education core requirements are completed at the senior institution on top of the vocationally/technically skills-oriented AAS degree earned at the 2-year college.

E. Consensus among 2-year and 4-year colleges describing initiatives is that technical and community colleges are responding to legitimate workforce needs through AAS degree, and that senior institutions have an obligation to provide baccalaureate opportunities in response to demands from employers.

F. A significant number of institutions – both 2-year and 4-year – are working to incorporate the K-12 community into the articulation process through strategies such as dual-credit and dual-enrollment.•The articulation is further enhanced between 2-year and 4-year institutions in programs where dual-admission is an operative strategy.

H. •Significantly enhanced communication between and among institutions and external constituencies is being achieved through technology. Three model websites were frequently cited:
   1. Illinois (IAI): http://www.itransfer.org
   2. Maryland (ARTSYS): http://artweb.usmd.edu
   3. New Jersey: http://admissions.rutgers.edu/html/070201.asp

J. Common course numbering system has been implemented between the University of North Carolina System and the North Carolina Community College System, and has substantially reduced confusion concerning transferability of courses. Other states are implementing comparable models.

K. Distance education is being addressed through technology. New Mexico, Texas, and Kentucky, among other states, have created "Virtual Universities" to provide baccalaureate opportunities to state residents who cannot study at a campus.

L. A number of states are granting baccalaureate-conferral authority to 2-year colleges in specific, high-demand programs in areas where 4-year institutions do not satisfy that demand.

M. Numerous states have senior institutions offering upper division courses on 2-year campuses where a commute to the 4-year institution is prohibitive.

O. In a related vein, joint-use facilities between 2-year and 4-year institutions is an emerging trend.

P. The survey reported and documented funding and cost concerns among both 2-year and 4-year institutions that both constrain institutions' abilities to deliver instructional programs that satisfy student access and transfer needs, as well as students' ability to pay for those programs. Innovations that result in new funding sources are difficult to find. A number of responding institutions, however, indicate that they have reallocated financial resources in ways that support scholarship opportunities for needy and meritorious transfer students.

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